

**folklore
across the
usa**

**a localized
guide**

Liz White 2018



intro

For nearly as long as humans have lived on Earth, we've told stories about the creatures that inhabit it alongside us. Different peoples, different cultures, different regions have their own shades and spooks and species, many straddling the chasm between man and something else. Here, for your reference, a primer on some of the more well-known cryptids & co. that we may bump up against here in the United States.

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for further reading

Bigfoot: A 50-Year Journey Come Full Circle by Dr. Matthew Johnson
Weird NJ: Your Travel Guide to New Jersey's Local Legends and Best-Kept Secrets by Mark Moran and Mark Scurman
Mothman: Behind the Red Eyes by Jeff Wamsley
The World of Lore: Monstrous Creatures by Aaron Mahnke
All About Cryptids by Allistair Selby
A Field Guide to the Cryptids of North America by Dr. Courtney A. Shepherd
Ghostly Gotham: New York City's Haunted History by Lynda Lee Macken
Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (Folklore and Folklife) by Henry Glassie
Cryptozoology A to Z: The Encyclopedia of Loch Monsters, Sasquatch, Chupacabras, and Other Authentic Mysteries of Nature by Loren Coleman and Jerome Clark
American Monsters: A History of Monster Lore, Legends, and Sightings in America by Linda S. Godfrey

afterword

Professor Angus Gillepsie teaches folklore at Rutgers University. Speaking on the phone about the purpose of folklore in Americans' lives and why it endures, Gillepsie cites three factors: nostalgia, entertainment, and practical value. Nostalgia: folklore is passed from "father to son, mother to daughter." It connects us to our ancestors and to our more primitive selves. Entertainment: storytelling is "rewarding for listener and for teller." It's fun.

Then there's the practical side. Smugglers' operations protected by the Jersey Devil; the tragic banality of a collapsed bridge heralded by a winged messenger; the ultimate loss of a loved one kept at bay by their ghost.

Sometimes, asking *How does this function?* is more useful than asking *Is this real?* Meaning lies in the how and why, not the yes or no.

"The important thing," Gillepsie told me, "is not whether the story is true or false, but just that there is a story."

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the jersey devil

Region: New Jersey

It was 1735 when a woman called Mother Leeds, living in the remote Pine Barrens, conceived her thirteenth child. Upset by the prospect of another pregnancy, poor Mother Leeds cursed the child, saying he was the devil. Sure enough, he was born with hooves and wings, killed the midwife, and now haunts the Pine Barrens.



From The Philadelphia Bulletin, Jan 1909. This was the month of the "Devil craze," with nearly 1,000 reported sightings, a few attempted manhunts, and even school closures in the Pine Barrens.

Despite not falling into the category of cryptids proper or even necessarily "folklore," ghosts merit a mention here because they're an indelible part of this country's love affair with the preternatural. And as with a lot of folklore, ghost stories are often highly localized, and can reveal a lot about their native regions.

Maybe what's most important, though, is not the differences in the stories told in different regions, but the similarities. Is going squatching really any different from visiting a haunted house? Is believing you had a sea monster sighting any different from thinking you saw a ghost? It's easy to look down on some things as being rural or backwards or white trashy, while we hold up others as sophisticated and cosmopolitan. But when we really survey the stories that different communities tell over and over, it becomes clear that many of us have similar hopes and desires for ourselves and our towns and our children--and almost all of us are afraid of the same things.

ghosts and more



Just as cryptids aren't quite animals, ghosts aren't quite humans, and that's what makes them so frightening to so many: They're just like us, just like the person they were, but *not*. Yet we are still drawn to them—telling ghost stories, visiting haunted houses, making movie after movie.

This country bursts at the seams with ghosts. They're not relegated to urban landscapes in the same way that we expect cryptids to frequent the suburbs and rural areas, but cities, purely by virtue of the high volume of people that have lived and died in them, do lay claim to some of our most haunted places.

FLY RIVAL OF "LEEDS DEVIL" HAS JERSEY PEOPLE FRIGHTENED

Hoofprints in the Snow, Whirring Noises in the Air and Other Uncanny Manifestations Reach Bordentown and Mount Holly After Making Sensation in Lower Counties Where Natives Remain Indoors After Sundown

Residents of Bordentown, Mount Holly, Burlington, Gloucester and Woodbury and many other towns in Burlington and Gloucester Counties are greatly excited and mystified over the discovery of curious



hoof-prints, made it is thought by some strange animal not as yet classified by scientist or nature-faker. The trail of the beast, although no one is known to have seen the creature, leads to the belief that the animal is two-legged, with hoofs like a horse, has wings and is able to fly, possesses a remarkable form, so that it may crawl through a hole less than a foot in diameter, and is sufficiently cat-like to walk on fences and over chicken coops that would not bear up a twenty-pound weight.

Skillman, a little village near here, was the first place to report having seen a strange animal. Since then, the odd tracks have been followed for many miles and cover a strip of country three miles wide.

Old residents of South Jersey are recalling that in the winter of 1834 tracks were made by an unknown beast in the vicinity of Point Leeds, and the creature became famous as "the Point Leeds Devil." There was a similar excitement near Bridgeton in 1873.

Distinct imprints of the animal that is now holding public attention may be seen on the lawn of the home of Adam Cattell, of Woodbury. Five tracks are in the middle of the grass plot, and as there are no others in sight, Mr. Cattell is convinced that the creature can fly.

In Gloucester City, "Hank" White and "Tom" Hamilton, negroes, followed the trail for twenty miles Monday. "It's an air hoss," said White. "an' I ain't a-gwine out no mo' without my gun. Tom, he told me that down in Georgia there is an air hoss, what flies" (Continued on Page Three.)

The Trenton Times, Jan 1909

The Jersey Devil serves the same purpose as the Boogeyman or even Santa Claus—scaring children into good behavior. It provides a convincing incentive for kids to stay close to the campsite and be good for Mom and Dad. It works on adults, too. Centuries ago, Jersey Lightning, a kind of apple brandy, was manufactured in the Pine Barrens, where legends of the Devil dissuaded revenue agents from poking around. Similarly, ships that didn't want to pay customs would dock by the Pine Barrens and smuggle their goods to New York via Conestoga wagons.

the mothman

Region: West Virginia (Point Pleasant area)

The Mothman was first sighted in 1966. Five West Virginia men were digging a grave when they saw something roughly the size and shape of a man fly over their heads, coming from the trees. Only two nights later, a pair of young couples reported a similar experience: a creature with a 10-foot wingspan whose eyes glowed red in their car headlights. "I'm a hard guy to scare," attested one of the men to the Point Pleasant Register. "but last night I was for getting out of there."

'Red-Eyed Creature' Reported in W. Va.

POINT PLEASANT, W.Va. (UPI)—Two Point Pleasant couples told police Wednesday their car was followed about midnight by a "birdlike creature" 6 to 7 feet tall with red eyes and a 10-foot wingspan.

Steve Mallette and Roger Scarberry and their wives told Mason County sheriff's deputies they were riding near the McClinton Wildlife Reserve when they first encountered "the thing."

It was large, measure

Unknown WV newspaper.

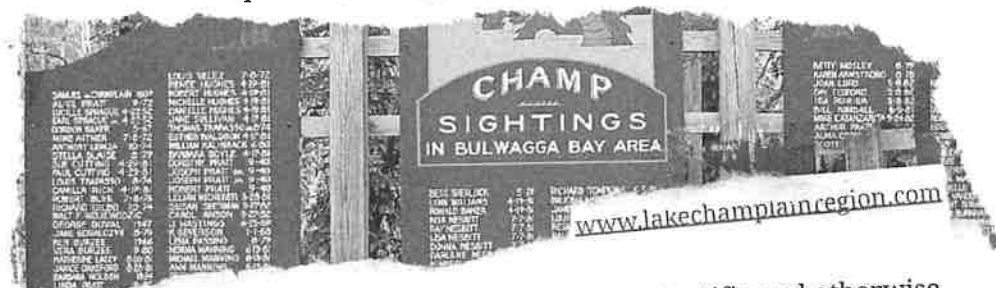
sea creatures

Region: Chesapeake Bay, Lake Champlain, &

The most famous sea creature, no doubt, is Nessie of Loch Ness, with possible competition from the Kraken. Sirens and mermaids are runners-ups. But here in North America, we have our own answers to the aquatic cryptid question. Meet Chessie of Chesapeake Bay and Champ of Lake Champlain.

Chessie costumes are now a regular fixture at events like the Maryland Faerie Parade, but she was first spotted in 1936 by the crew of a military helicopter, who reported "something reptilian and unknown." Witnesses often describe Chessie as being like a large (25-30 ft?), brown water-snake-like a manatee, but not quite.

Champ, or Champy, inhabits Lake Champlain, a body of water shared between Vermont, upstate New York, and Canada. Champ is older than Chessie, with sightings dating back, again, to the stories of indigenous people. The first such recorded instance was in 1819, in the Plattsburgh Republican. This report alleged Champ to be 187 feet long, though another report from 1883 puts him at 25-30 feet. All in all, there have been over 300 reported Champ sightings. In the late 1880s, P. T. Barnum offered several rewards for the capture of Champ.



Today, there are many perspectives on Champ, scientific and otherwise. One man, storyteller Joe Citro, suggests that certain spots on Lake Champlain may be "unstuck in time." When we see Champ, what we're really catching is a glimpse into the area's prehistoric past.

the wendigo

Region: Coastal/Great Lakes

Like the jackalope, the hoedag, and others, the Wendigo is a lower-profile cryptid. And, like many North American cryptids, the Wendigo finds its origins in the stories of indigenous people. It is said to possess the human body, and, at times, to induce fits of cannibalism. In some stories, a human becomes so greedy that they transform into a Wendigo.

The Wendigo, as described by scholar Basil Johnston of Ontario:

The Wendigo was gaunt to the point of emaciation, its desiccated skin pulled tightly over its bones. With its bones pushing out against its skin, its complexion the ash-gray of death, and its eyes pushed back deep into their sockets, the Wendigo looked like a gaunt skeleton recently disinterred from the grave. What lips it had were tattered and bloody [....] Unclean and suffering from suppurations of the flesh, the Wendigo gave off a strange and eerie odor of decay and decomposition, of death and corruption.

Like any cryptid, versions of the Wendigo stalk pop culture as well, from the universe of Stephen King to Marvel comic books to the game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Always, though, the figure represents wickedness and greed. Accordingly, the Wendigo is often linked, too, to colonialism. There have been more than a few references made to Christopher Columbus being Wendigo.



More reports followed in the coming weeks. They culminated a month later with the collapse of the Silver Bridge, which killed 46 people. Some blame the Mothman for the collapse, but a more common belief holds that the Mothman appears as a herald to warn of impending tragedy. This is the basis for the 2002 film *The Mothman Prophecies*. There have been such reports connected to other disasters--Fukushima, Chernobyl, and even 9/11--where witnesses claim that they spotted the Mothman and fled the area just in time.



From the Mothman Museum's official website.

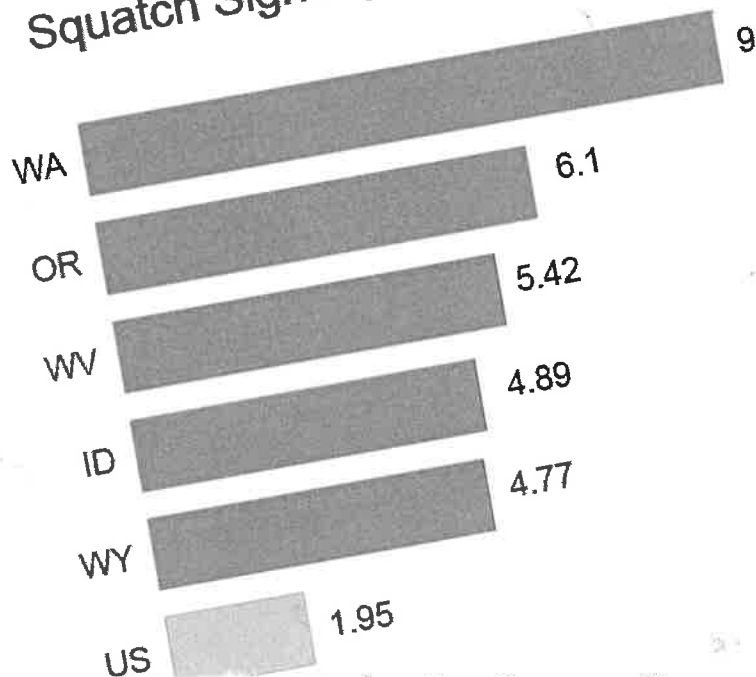
Locally, at least, the Mothman has taken on something of a friendly persona. Today, Point Pleasant boasts the Mothman Museum, right beside the famed Mothman Statue. For a modest entrance fee of \$3.50, one can soak up all the Mothman lore (and merch) a soul could desire.

bigfoot

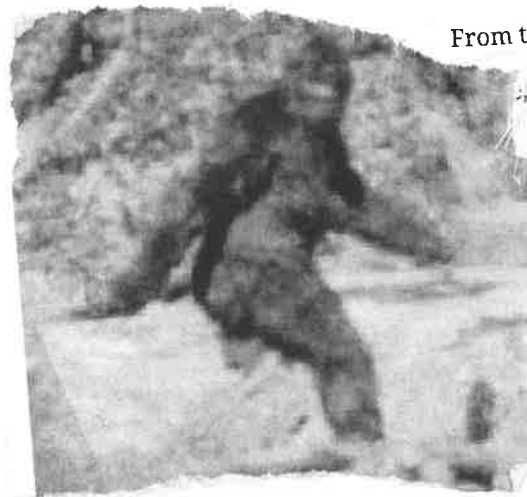
Region: Washington State, Oregon, West Virginia (top 3 states for per capita reported sightings)

The Bigfoot Field Research Organization maintains a database of reported Bigfoot encounters over the past several decades, each described in detail, organized by county, and classified A, B, or C according to its plausibility. (The BFRO is also the force behind the Animal Planet show *Finding Bigfoot*.) The chart below compares the states with the top five highest per capita rates of encounters to the national average.

Squatch Sightings Per 100,000 People



Ron Morehead has been researching Bigfoot since 1971. He is responsible for the Sierra Sounds, "the first known verified audio recordings of sasquatch vocalizations." Via email, he discussed the pushback that Bigfoot researchers face from the broader scientific community, which "ignores the subject for fear of academic ridicule, loss of tenure, or future project funding." When he had his initial encounter decades ago with several other men, they were wary of coming forward. Their group included businessmen and board members of a megachurch—Morehead was both—and they "needed to maintain respect in the community."



From the iconic 1967 Patterson Gimlin footage which claimed to capture a sasquatch on film.

For Dr. Matthew Johnson, his first sighting, on a hike with his wife and young children, posed similar dilemmas. His anxieties were realized when he went public and the story blew up. A group of people he now describes as "haters and trolls" appealed to the American Board of Professional Psychology to revoke his license to practice. Dr. J, as he likes to be called, lost two patients from his private practice in the ensuing media frenzy. The appeal to the ABPP was denied, though, and Dr. J ended up gaining a new patient who was drawn to him for his honesty.

Andrea Billups says you can't really understand Bigfoot culture unless you go to the woods and experience it. She's a journalism professor in Florida (she acknowledges herself as an outcast in a profession "full of liberals"), and that's what she did: flew to Southern Oregon to spend 4 days at Dr. J's sasquatch research area.